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AUTHOR Soto, Lourdes Diaz
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ABSTRACT

An investigation was made to ascertian perceptions and practices of parents whose children had been retained in kindergarten as well as parents' perceptions of their child's reaction to being retained. Also collected were data on the demographic characteristics of the families and their children. Specifically, data were obtained by means of a questionnaire focusing on parental agreement or disagreement, parental feelings, perceptions of the experience for the child, teacher's role, child's reaction to the experience, effects on parenting, effects on daily family life, and the person responsible for the retention decision. The questionnaire was sent to 40 families from a school district in Florida who differed widely in socioeconomic status; 10 families responded. Findings indicated that parents: (1) felt that the teachers had their child's best interest in mind; (2) believed the decision to retain their child in kindergarten would have positive effects for the child, especially with regard to socialization; and (3) appeared to agree with the decision, but felt angry, embarrassed, and overwhelmed. It is concluded that it is beyond the scope of the classroom teacher to provide the emotional support needed by the families. Recommendations for intervention are offered, as are ethical and legal implications of retaining ethnically diverse children. (RH)

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PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES REGARDING KINDERGARTEN RETENTION

LOURDES DIAZ SOTO

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

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Running Head: Kindergarten Retention

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ABSTRACT

The practice of retaining kindergarten children in schools continues to be prevalent. The effects of grade retention on children's academic and affective outcomes have been previously examined by researchers but the effects on the family unit have been neglected. The purpose of this investigation was to obtain perceptions and practices of parents whose children have been retained in kindergarten as well as parental perceptions of the child's reaction to the experience. Ten families from a southeastern school district in Florida responded (out of 40). The ethnically diverse parents responding stated that teachers had their child's best interest in mind but that they were experiencing feelings of anger and embarrassment as well as having to deal with symptoms of childhood stress. It is apparent that the emotional support needed by these families is beyond the scope of the classroom teacher. Recommendations are offered as are the ethical and legal implications of retaining ethnically diverse children.

PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES REGARDING KINDERGARTEN RETENTION

The debate over grade retention is not over. The practice of "redshirting" children by repeating the same or similar curriculum continues to be prevalent across the nation and varies from state to state (Rose, Medway, Cantrell, and Marus 1983). In Florida, for example, there were 4,420 children retained in kindergarten in the year 1977-78, while 12,885 were retained in 1985-86 (see Table 1), indicating a continuation and increase of the practice. Previous researchers reviewing the literature on the effects of grade retention have noted that educators who continue to advocate this practice do so without valid research evidence (Jackson, 1975) and despite cumulative research evidence showing that the potential for negative effects consistently outweighs the positive outcomes (Holmes and Matthews, 1984). A study conducted by Yamamoto (1980) found that children reported retention to be as stressful as going blind or losing a parent. Retention practices have varied historically according to student and contextual factors and with philosophical biases acting as mediating variables in the decision-making process (Rose, Medway, Cantrell, and Marus, 1983). The fact that children continue to be recommended for retention in school districts nationwide makes it imperative for researchers to continue to examine this policy.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The effects of grade retention on children's academic and affective outcomes have been examined but effects on the parent and the family have been neglected. Ames (1980) suggests a need to examine expectations and reactions of family

members to the grade retention experience. Finlayson (1977), interested in examining non-promotion and self concept in the primary grades obtained parental opinions of the experience. Parents interviewed by Finlayson stated that their child liked school more, were more confident, happier and suffered no stigma attached to the decision. The parents also believed the effect to be a positive one and would make the same decision again were the same situation to come up in the future..

The typical profile of a child who is at risk of being retained includes: being a male, having a lower academic achievement score, having a lower IQ, parental unwillingness or inability to intercede, having minority status, being of low socioeconomic status, having a working mother, poor readiness skills, July to December birthdate, late maturation and high activity level (Walker, 1984). Schuyler (1985) found that students who were more likely to be retained were Hispanics and Blacks, males, free lunch participants, and first graders. Rose, et al. (1983) found higher incidences of retention among Blacks, Spanish-speaking children, and below poverty level homes whose parents had less than 12 years of education (see Table 1).

Interest in examining the parental perceptions and practices resulting from kindergarten retention decisions was sparked by discussions with kindergarten teachers and parents of kindergarten children while undergoing the decision making process. While the research evidence indicates that negative consequences of retaining children in school may outweigh positive consequences, parents and teachers appear to have strong feelings and opinions contrary to achievement and tests score outcomes. The purpose of the present investigation was to ascertain perceptions and practices of parents whose children have been retained in kindergarten as well as parental perceptions of the child's reaction to the experience. It was also of interest to pursue demographic characteristics of the families and their children in light of previous descriptions in the literature

METHOD

A pool of items was obtained by asking 47 graduate early childhood educators presently teaching in a southeastern state to identify questions which might be important to ask parents whose children were recommended for kindergarten retention. The guidelines include topics which might be pertinent to examine such as parental perceptions of the experience and parental perceptions of the child's reactions. A Likert-type scale was designed by collating questions and eliminating repetitions. The questions fell into eight categories:

(a) Parental agreement/disagreement
(b) Parental feelings
(c) Perceptions of the experience (positive/negative) for the child
(d) Teacher's role
(e) Child's reaction to the experience
(f) Effects on parenting
(g) Effects on daily family life
(h) Who's to blame?

Three open-ended questions were also included to allow for other parental opinions and feeling regarding what they would like people to know about the effects of kindergarten retention on the family life; what they would like the school to know; and what they would tell other parents about this experience.

The search for a sample became a complicated procedure when the nearby school districts would give permission, retract permission, or in one instance attempt to change the study altogether. The investigator asked for alternate possibilities such as sending letters home and asking parents to identify themselves if interested, telephone calls, and mailings. Research investigations dealing with school retention often appear suspect to school administrators. Two years after the scale had been designed one of the school districts reported the names of all of the public school principals with kindergarten programs. All of the principals received a letter asking for the names of the families whose children had been retained in kindergarten. The two principals who elected to participate (out of 36) sent names

and addresses of the families which could thus be contacted by mail. The children attending these particular schools may be described as the extremes in the socio-economic ladder. One school is predominantly composed of migrant labour, transient families while the other of is upper mobile young professionals.

Forty families received the self addressed, self stamped but otherwise unmarked questionnaires. In spite of the small sample (N=10) obtained the investigator decided to report the findings when colleagues became interested in the unique detailed responses provided by the parents. The ten families who responded are obviously interested in the issue as the questionnaire is relatively lengthy (47+ items) and requires both time and effort on their part. Responses provided by these parents are illuminating with regard to parental perceptions of the kindergarten retention process but the reader is cautioned about drawing strong conclusions from such a small sample. This investigation may be viewed as providing preliminary findings into a practice affecting both children and parents.

RESULTS

Table 2 shows the family demographic information and previous experiences of parents and their children.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

It is interesting to note that four out of ten parents in this sample had been retained in school. Most of the families are intact, ranged in occupations from migrant labour workers to one medical doctor, and obtained an education ranging from grade three to medical school. Two children had no previous experience in early childhood programs. The ethnic descent of the families varied with only one white family, one Middle-eastern family, three Hispanic families, and five Black

families. The children were evenly divided by gender with five males and five females. The number of siblings ranged from 0-9 with a mean of 3.75

The types of questions which received the strongest agreement (6=strongly agree) from the parents dealt with: the teacher's supportive and helping role (x=4.9); concerns regarding the child's ability; (x=5.3); child needs more family support (x=4.8); child will benefit socially (x=4.6); child will benefit academically (x=3.8); will be positive for the child (x=4.2); child has experienced stress as a result of this experience (x=4.1); family has experience stress as a result of this experience (x=4.1); child has experienced a series of stressful events since birth (x=4.1); and plans to spend more time with the child (x=4.3).

The types of questions which received the strongest disagreement (1=strongly disagree) from the parents dealt with: child not succeeding in school (x=1.8); my spouse is to blame (x=1.2); it is the child's fault (1.6); I am to blame (x=2.0); teacher bias (x=2.7); decision is reflective of my parenting abilities (x-2.2); I have not spent enough time with child (x=2.3); opposed to decision (x=2.6); my child is unhappy (x=2.2); child was punished (x=1.8); child is relieved by decision (x=2.5); have discussed with other parents (x=2.6); child understands (x=2.9); and the way I deal with my child has changed (x=2.6).

Figure 1 shows parental perceptions of the kindergarten retention experience and their respective means and standard deviations. These categories were obtained by summing related items together.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

In examining the responses obtained it can be stated that parents in the present sample felt that the teachers had their child's best interest in mind; that the

decision to retain their child in kindergarten will have positive effects for the child especially with regard to socialization; the parents appear to agree with the decision but feel angry, embarrassed, and overwhelmed. The parents stated that their family life had been affected and that the child experienced stress as a result of the retention. No one was blamed for the retention decision but the parents expressed concern for their child's ability and plan to spend more time with the child and be as supportive as possible.

In spite of the fact that this study is of a descriptive nature, it may be interesting to note statistically significant gender differences (T-test=2.58, df=8, p .05) With parents of females (x=3.65, sd=.5) obtaining higher scores in relation to parents of males (x=2.99, sd=.3). This may mean that there are differing perceptions and opinions by parents with regard to retention along gender lines. Responses to the open-ended questions included descriptions of physical symptoms experienced by children, stress experienced by the family, disagreement with the retention policy, wished would have known earlier, difficulty dealing with siblings, repeating the same skills and curriculum, "please don't retain," "all her papers were very good, excellent," "he cry and cry," and "things are less pressured."

Recommendations

Inspite of the small sample obtained in the present investigation several recommendations appear warrented. The parents in the present sample were convinced that the classroom teacher had their child's best interest in mind. Inspite of the teacher's ability to provide emotional support for parents, the family unit continued to feel anger, embarrassment, and stress. Chandler (1985) notes that the most important influences determining the magnitude of stress is the individuals perception of the situation. Perception plays a vital role in mediating the effects of stress.

Additional emotional support is recommended for these families as are alternative educational strategies. It may be that the support which the family unit needs at this time is beyond the scope of the classroom teacher. It may be necessary to elicit the help of other professionals during the year that a child is recommended for retention in kindergarten.

The fact that a disproportionate number of ethnically diverse children are being recommended for retention in kindergarten brings ethical considerations to mind. School programs need to examine their acceptance or rejection of childhood diversity and their ability to implement enrichment and compensatory programs. Decision making models such as the one advocated by Lieberman (1980) which include frequency of geographic moves ("it seems easier to retain a student when he is entering a school for the first time, p.43") foreign language spoken in the home ("...limited exposure to the English language or American culture, this factor may loom larger on the 'for retention' side, p.43") may be earmarking whole groups of children for retention. This practice may place school districts in legal jeopardy in the future. School districts may want to brainstorm for alternate solutions, programs, and implementation strategies for <u>all</u> of our kindergarten students. There is some evidence that social promotion with remediation may be more effective than retention (Peterson, DeGracie, Ayabe, 1987). The expectations being placed on young children as a result of the 'back to basics' movement has literally erased the original intention of our kindergarten programs. Will kindergarten be a positive experience for children or a nightmare?

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TABLE I

Number of Kindergarten Students Not Promoted in Florida's Public Schools

Year	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	American Indian	Total	TOTAL ENROLLMENT	PERCENTAGE RETAINED
1985-86	6962	4710	1112	93	8	12885	112,307	11.47
1984-85	6038	4571	1074	89	15	11787	112,806	10.45
1983-84	5103	4172	941	61	12	10289	98,396	10.46
1982-83	4713	3840	911	84	7	9555	97,026	9.85
1981-82	3790	3161	902	68	8	7929	89,175	8.89
1980-81	2743	2189	653	37	9	5631	89,162	6.31
1979-80	2833	2094	562	42	4	5535	90,686	6.10
1978-79	2399	1954	593	34	4	4884	89,2624	5.47
1977-78	2286	1707	394	28	5	4420	92,410	4.78

TABLE 2

Demographic Family Characteristics and Previous Experiences

Child's Gender	Race	Birth Date	Siblings	Age Entered School	EEC	Marital Status	Occupation	Parents Level of Education	Parent Retained
01/FE	Black	3/81	2	4	N+PK	M	Secy/Bookkpr	GED/Some College	None
02/FE	Hisp	10/80	1	6	PK	M	House/Migrant	11th/3rd	None
03/MA	Black	11/80	2	3	DC	-	-	--	Mother
04/FE	White	7/81	5	4	PK	M	House/Migrant	HS/9th	None
05/MA	Black	9/20	2	-	PK	-	-	-	Mother
06/MA	Hisp	5/81	1	5	None	M	House/Migrant	10th/6th	Mother
07/FE	Black	5/81	9	4	HdS	M	House/Bus Drv	11th/6th	Father
08/MA	Hisp	1/81	3	4	DC	M	House/Migrant	6th/9th	None
09/MA	Other	1/81	0	2.5	N+PK	M	Grad Student/ Medical Doctor	M.S./M.D.	None
10/FE	Black	11/80	4	5	None	S	Unemp	HS	None

EEC = Early Childhood Programs attended by child

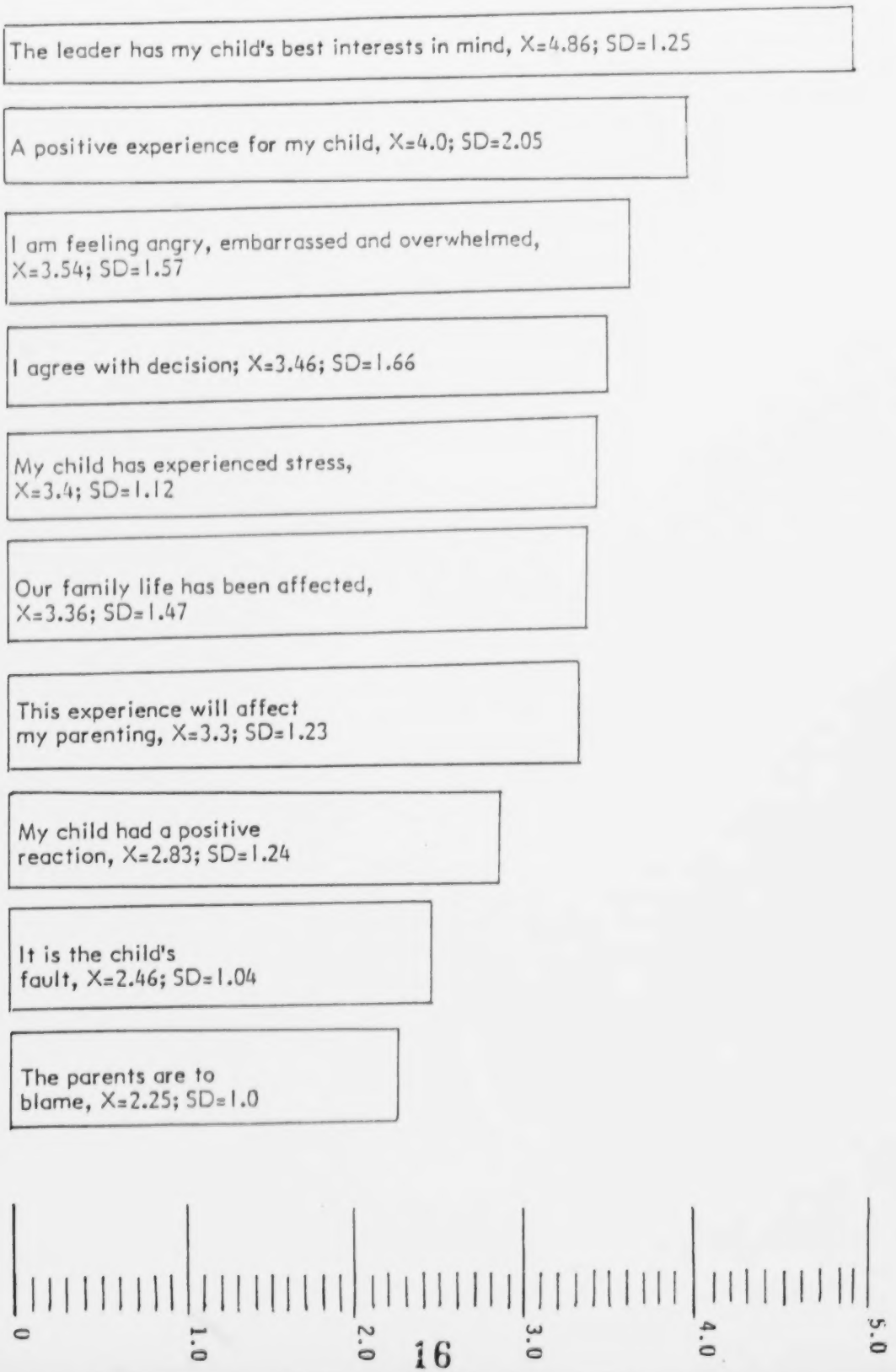
DC = Day Care

N = Nursery School

PK = PreKinder

HdS = Head Start

Figure 1
Parental Perceptions of Kindergarten Retention


The leader has my child's best interests in mind, X=4.86; SD=1.25
A positive experience for my child, X=4.0; SD=2.05
I am feeling angry, embarrassed and overwhelmed, X=3.54; SD=1.57
I agree with decision; X=3.46; SD=1.66
My child has experienced stress, X=3.4; SD=1.12
Our family life has been affected, X=3.36; SD=1.47
This experience will affect my parenting, X=3.3; SD=1.23
My child had a positive reaction, X=2.83; SD=1.24
It is the child's fault, X=2.46; SD=1.04
The parents are to blame, X=2.25; SD=1.0
0
1.0
2.0
3.0
4.0
5.0